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 CANADIAN SAFE SPORT

THINK TANK REPORT

Influencing the recovery and rebuilding of the Canadian sport system to set a benchmark for the world.

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GYMNASTS FOR CHANGE CANADA

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✦ CANADA

Contents

Executive Summary	3
Section 1: Overview of Individual Perspectives	5
Section 2: The 1 % - High-Performance Sport	8
Section 3: The 99 % - Mass Participation	11
Section 4: A National Inquiry	15
Summary	17

Executive Summary

Background

The Canadian sport system is in need of review and reform. For the last two years, the culture and operations of sport in Canada have been under the spotlight for its failures to adequately serve and protect all Canadians who participate in sport. Despite the heightened scrutiny from the parliamentary hearings conducted by Canadian Heritage and the Standing Committee on Status of Women, there has been limited action from both the Government of Canada and national sport leaders to acknowledge and act upon the national crisis to ensure sport in Canada becomes a safe, healthy, and equitable environment for all. Whether it is the 99% of Canadians who participate in sport to enjoy the social and health benefits that physical activity and organized play can offer or the 1% of Canadians who reach the peak of performance in the national and international arena, every Canadian engaged in sport has the right to be safe and protected and to access sport without barriers.

Recognizing the lack of inaction, Global Athlete and Gymnasts for Change Canada gathered a cross-section of Canadian sports people for the *Canadian Safe Sport Think Tank* to

collectively discuss the country's sporting crisis. Advocates, survivors, Olympic and National Team athletes, coaches, sports administrators, and scholars engaged in a comprehensive examination of the Canadian sport system and collaborated to identify a pathway for its recovery and reconstruction. Over two days, participants were provided a safe space to offer open and honest feedback and perspectives on the Canadian sport system.

All information and direct quotes in this report are based on attendees' personal and professional experiences within the Canadian sport system. To prevent retaliation and retribution toward participants, the names of those who attended the think tank will remain confidential.

Key Findings

Through individual presentations and roundtables, four pivotal themes emerged as playing a role in the shortcomings of Canada's sport system:

Collusion and Conflicts of Interest: The Canadian sport system was discerned to be duplicitous by design with a high level

of collusion. In this system, conflicts of interest and hidden affiliations protect the status quo and serve nationalist goals driven by the commodification of sport and the commercial exploitation of athletes. Power is limited to a few organizations such as Own the Podium (OTP) and the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC), leaving National Sport Organizations (NSOs) in a vulnerable position, where fear of losing funding dictates the operation of their sports.

Nationalist Goals of Sport within the Global System: With sport placed under Canadian Heritage, the design of the sport system has been inherently focused on utilizing the 1% of the sporting population, the elite athletes, to promote Canada's identity, culture, values, and legacy on a global scale. This approach has failed to serve 99% of the sporting population who play sport for fun, health, and socialization.

The Exploitation of Athletes: There is little to no protection of athletes in Canada. The safe sport systems that have been established are failing the 1% population of elite athletes while also neglectfully under-funding and under-resourcing 99% of the sporting population. The self-regulation of sport has denied athletes of all levels and backgrounds access to justice and remedy, exacerbating the denial of basic human rights.

A National Inquiry: The Canadian sport system is failing the masses while simultaneously eroding high-performance sport. A national inquiry is necessary to understand what all Canadians need and want from sport and how sport can best become a

tool for health, community, and development instead of a propaganda tool for nationalist goals.

If the Canadian sport system continues to operate in this manner, the ability to create, serve, and maintain a healthy population and a healthy and successful sporting culture will be eroded.

Section 1

Individual Perspectives

The personal narratives from survivors, advocates, Olympic and National Team athletes, coaches, scholars, and sport administrators provided insight into the landscape of Canadian sport that was unanimously described as a “systemic failure”.

Through these perspectives, an overarching narrative became clear: The Canadian sport system needs wholesale reform as it is duplicitous by design with a high level of collusion where conflicts of interest and hidden affiliations protect the status quo and serve nationalist goals driven by the commodification of sport and commercial exploitation of athletes.

This narrative emerged through three key areas: collusion and conflicts of interest, nationalist goals of sport within the global system, and the exploitation of athletes.

One: Collusion & Conflicts of Interest

Participants indicated that:

- They had knowledge and first-hand experiences of collusion in hiring and re-hiring processes, covering up wrongdoings, misconduct, and/or abuse, and the emergence of “safe-sport experts” who were noted as “playing both sides” of the system.
- The external “safe-sport experts” who are hired by National Sporting Organizations (NSOs) for investigations also carry out consulting for the NSOs.
- The flawed approach of using mediation or internal investigations to handle complaints rather than truly independent investigations often results in coaches or

staff members remaining in the system regardless of complaints, reports, or findings against them.

- The self-governing nature of sport is dangerous and damaging, and a practice not seen in other industries or sectors of society.
- Coaching is failing in practice, as coaches who try to “update the system”, modernize sport culture, or aim to execute the best practices are pushed out, even at the community level.

“There is a high level of collusion to protect the current system rather than a high-level collaboration to move the system forward.”

Two: Nationalist Goals within the Global System

Participants indicated that:

- Capitalism and globalization have largely shaped the sporting system in Canada which has been established to serve the global model of sport – a system dictated by bodies such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Paralympic Committee (IPC).
- Sport in Canada is being driven by this global model, where the focus on winning medals dictates the functioning and funding of every sport.
- The Canadian government is kowtowing to the IOC's model and shaping sport to serve nationalist goals to promote the country's wealth, modernity, and stability. Furthermore, while economic and racial barriers exist in participation, protection, and the agency to speak out for individuals from marginalised groups, diversity box-ticking at the elite level is being used to perpetuate token nationalist propaganda.
- The funding of the talent pathway and high performance is flawed and the reliance that NSOs have on the funding decisions of Own the Podium (OTP) is deeply problematic for the stability and agency of NSOs.
- The focus on high performance is skewed, giving many High-Performance Directors unchecked power.
- The global model of sport has created funding frameworks that operate in four-year cycles, (mirroring the Olympic and

Paralympic cycles) often leading to athletes and sports outside of the four-year podium trajectory without resources for development, and furthermore, without resources that extend down to the grassroots.

“Athletes are left with nothing just to bring prestige to Canada.”

Three: The Exploitation of Athletes

Participants indicated that:

- Athletes were subject to silencing, abuse, oppression, and discrimination.
- Athletes were silenced by leadership within the sports, noting that athletes are kept in silos to prevent them from realising their shared experiences such as mental, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, threats, and coercion.
- They experienced the damaging effects of decades of abuse during critical years of adolescent and adult development.
- The athlete voice is often ignored as it is seen as inferior and an underlying belief that “athletes are dumb” prevails in the minds of board members and powerbrokers. Furthermore, when athletes are given a seat on boards, they are either told to be silent and be grateful they are allowed a seat, or the athletes have been carefully selected and groomed to follow the status quo to protect those in power.

- While funding models focus on high performance, athletes have limited financial support and the toxic culture that exists in high performance is damaging athletes' well-being in numerous ways and is ineffective for increasing performance and in turn, winning medals.
- The narrative of "hardships will lead you to your medals" has allowed for toxic cultures to prevail. This narrative has also groomed the public and parents to accept various forms of maltreatment and human rights violations as normal within sport.
- The Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SRDCC) and the Office of the Sport Integrity Commissioner (OSIC) are not independent of sport and are not trusted by athletes. Athletes feel unsafe and have been retraumatized by the process of reporting through these mechanisms.
- The sifting through of children to identify talent primarily serves to fill the global talent pipeline, placing athletes at risk of being exploited as human resources to achieve high-performance KPIs.

"I didn't feel like my life was worth living."

Section 2

The 1 % - High-Performance Sport

Through multiple roundtables looking at the main orchestrators of Canadian sport, participants discussed the shortcomings of the current system – identifying what the leading organisations **purport they do in comparison to what they actually do**. In discussing the polarities of theory vs reality for these organisations, another narrative became increasingly clear – the Canadian sport system has been built to service the elite 1% while simultaneously harming and restricting the human rights of the largest stakeholder within that 1%, the athletes. The 1% is defined in this report as the population of Canadians competing in sport at the national and international level.

The **Canadian Olympic Committee (COC)** and the **Canadian Paralympic Committee (CPC)** have positioned themselves as organisations that lead the preparation of the Olympic and Paralympic Games for Canadian athletes while also promoting and celebrating high performance, Olympism, and the Olympic brand, and selling the Olympic/Paralympic dream. However, participants identified that these organisations 'achieve' those objectives by:

- Owning and commodifying athletes.

- Taking money out of the system for commercial contracts.
- Influencing powerholders within the government and corporate sector to enjoy the Olympic experience to ensure the status quo remains undisturbed.
- Acting as an extension of the IOC and IPC and thereby becoming complicit in human rights violations of these organisations.
- Marketing the glorified story of the Olympics and Paralympics and selling the Olympic and Paralympic brands and logos.
- Controlling NSOs, leading to a culture of fear.
- Highly influencing multiple media outlets to ensure the positive Olympic and Paralympic narratives prevail.
- Grooming selected athletes to prepare them for employment within the COC or CPC at the end of their careers to control the positive narrative through the voice of former Olympians and Paralympians.
- Commodifying and exploiting athletes to promote token nationalist propaganda.
- Limiting themselves from accountability and oversight of spending.

The **National Sporting Organisations (NSOs)** of Canada have equally positioned themselves as pursuing excellence and development of high-performance sport through the administration of sport at the national level. Additionally, they market themselves as the growers of the game and inspire everyone to enjoy sport and develop champions. Yet, participants discerned that the mechanisms by which they aim to meet these claims in practice are done via:

- Self-regulating and self-governing to maintain a closed circle removed from liability.
- Destroying community-level sport through the centralization of high-performance programs.
- Specializing children too early thereby damaging the fun and safety of sport for kids.
- Exploiting children and young athletes' motivation to achieve their dreams by inflicting multiple forms of abuse and manipulation for the sake of high performance.
- Abdicating their duty of care and accountability to organisations below and above them.

It was also noted that the NSOs walk a tightrope between the Provincial Sporting Organisations (PSO), which they must service, and OTP, which they rely on for funding recommendations and approvals that are distributed by the Federal Government. This tightrope is eroding the ability of NSOs to effectively service their members, as their focus is turned toward high performance and

winning medals to access funding, regardless of the human cost. Subsequently, the value proposition of NSOs is becoming less attractive to grassroots and provincial members. With NSOs almost entirely focused on resourcing high performance, the NSO has become disconnected from its primary membership and most of its participants at the grassroots and lower competitive levels. This has led to the rise of competing academies and private sports clubs, which exist outside of the NSO stream and appear to offer better business practices and higher-quality programs for local communities.

Sport Canada's role in the orchestration of sport has also been misleading and ineffective. While Sport Canada has positioned itself to oversee the operation and funding of sport, it was identified by participants that the reality is much different. Instead, Sport Canada provides little to no oversight of the operations and primarily provides a funding stream to the Canadian sport system based on recommendations from OTP. Sport Canada was noted as being disengaged from the 'on-ground' running of sports with closed lines between athletes and the organization's administrators. Currently, Sport Canada lacks the capacity and capability to drive sport forward in a positive way and to enact the Canadian Sport Policy.

Own the Podium (OTP) has established itself as the body for making funding recommendations to NSOs to help Canada achieve success on the world stage. However, it was identified that OTP's arm extends far beyond making recommendations. The

organization controls the purse strings, programs, staff, and leadership of the Canadian sport system. By doing so, it sets and protects the status quo of the system and has become *“the architect of the current culture of sport that has enabled harm to occur on a national scale”*.

The **Office of the Sport Integrity Commissioner (OSIC)** has presented itself as an independent body and as a mechanism independent of the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SDRCC). Yet, participants highlighted that OSIC exists as a program within the SRDCC and is rife with real and perceived conflicts of interest at every level of its staffing and board, eroding any suggestions of independence from sport. In practice, OSIC was discerned to have no teeth to enact its mandate as it has no ability to subpoena, compel documents, or enforce sanctions. Even if OSIC was a viable organization, participants noted that its mandate and jurisdiction are severely limited and largely confined to complaints originating at the national level. Once again, these mechanisms are failing to reach the 99% of participants engaging in sport at a community or grassroots level.

As participants shared and discussed these comparisons of theory and practice for the main actors of Canadian sport, it became clear that whilst these leading organisations are highly focused on servicing high-performance sport for the 1%, they simultaneously erode the possibility of achieving success, development, and growth by failing to adequately resource the 99% of people playing sport at the community level.

Section 3

The 99 % - Mass Participation

The 99% is defined in this report as the pool of Canadians who play sport at the grassroots and provincial level – it is also the pool of possibility for the 1%. As identified in Section 1, the orchestrators of Canadian sport are overly concentrated on high performance and are neglecting the needs of the majority of individuals engaged in sport in Canada.

The problems and possible solutions for this imbalance were examined through three areas: The Department of Canadian Heritage, The Participation Pathway, and Safe Sport.

The Department of Canadian Heritage

It was identified that most people do not begin playing sport, nor do their parents put them in sport, to become an Olympian or Paralympian. The journey into sport for most is to enjoy the social and health benefits that physical activity and organized play can offer. More precisely, the value of sport for most people lies in the individual and collective benefits it can provide, not in results, medals, or high-performance achievement.

Sport, however, under the body of Sport Canada, is positioned within the Ministerial portfolio of Canadian Heritage – a department

mandated to create and uphold the nation's identity, culture, values, and legacy. This positioning is symbolic but telling – sport belongs to the legacy of Canada instead of to the health of Canadians, even though most of the people playing sport are not doing so to shape the legacy of the nation.

Situating sport inside Canadian Heritage has allowed the focus to be on high performance to adhere to nationalist goals and the global model of sport where success acts as a status symbol of a nation. Participants noted that situating sport inside Heritage gives the Government *“impetus to sanitise the present and the past to present sport as inherently good so that the legacy looks good.”* This sanitized view ignores that sport is not separate from Canada's broader social history of genocide, segregation, and the occupation of unceded lands. Sport is deeply intertwined with this history and the silencing and marginalization of Indigenous peoples and communities. It was acknowledged that understanding sport's role and impact on First Nations peoples requires broader consultation with their peoples and communities.

Participants discussed whether sport for all would be better served if it were situated

within the Department of Health. This thesis requires a broader investigation.

The Participation Pathway

Running parallel to the positioning of sport within the Department of Canadian Heritage, participants examined shifting the focus from high performance to the 99% of Canadians playing sport.

Firstly, it was explored why the sport system needs to widen the participation pathway. By increasing participation at the grassroots level, the pathway also widens at the elite level – providing a larger pool of selection for Canadian national teams. In discussing this concept, it was unanimously agreed that increasing the selection pool for the 1% cannot be the primary motivator for increasing participation, as it will fail to capture the needs of the 99% and continue to prioritise producing elite athletes for Canada’s legacy. Rather, the focus should be on creating a healthy population and fostering a life-long love of physical activity in the everyday Canadian. Without focusing on health, the status quo of moving “talented” athletes as quickly as possible to the top of the pathway, into elite sport, only to discard those athletes after they have provided a service to Canada will persist and continue to damage the largest stakeholder of the system.

Secondly, in identifying the importance of increased participation, two key barriers were outlined:

- Many young people stop playing sport because it is no longer fun, and the

environment is not safe.

- People of all ages and levels do not play sport because of the lack of access and equity.

It was identified that to widen the pathway, safe sport, access, and equity must be addressed first to ensure healthy club environments exist across Canada where all Canadians can access sport equally without barriers of race, ability, gender, sexuality, age, or socio-economic status.

Canadian Safe Sport

Growing sport and increasing participation cannot occur before the Canadian sport system becomes robust in protecting all participants at every level. It was unanimously agreed that sport must be safe before any organisation or group strategizes to increase participation. To do otherwise, and to increase the number of children participating in sport before making it safe, is borderline negligent.

“Safe Sport” was identified as an environment in which psychological needs are met and protected, where a healthy motivational climate encourages participation and performance, where life skills are developed for the world beyond sport, and where personal excellence is prioritised above athletic excellence.

It was acknowledged that ensuring safe sport necessitates not only placing children and athletes at the heart of sport and providing them with the understanding of their rights, safe sport principles, protocols and procedures

but also providing them with the agency to act upon their rights. Furthermore, the organisations and environments around children and athletes must support every individual when they exercise their agency.

Far beyond the services currently provided, safe sport requires sophisticated and streamlined mechanisms, completely independent from sport, for reporting and accountability. These mechanisms must be trauma-informed and include the public disclosure of both complaints and outcomes to ensure that coaches' and staff's privacy rights are not protected over the safety of children or sporting participants of any age. Coaches interact with children in a very similar way to teachers, but they do not have any of the training or regulations that exist within the education system. In observing this, participants noted the concept of "sport exceptionalism", wherein exemptions for abusive behaviour are carved out for coaches and staff due to the prevailing notion of 'sport autonomy'. Sport as a self-governing enterprise has allowed itself to operate with a different set of standards for safety and accountability for wrongdoing, which frequently takes precedence over laws that govern the rest of society.

It was concluded that organisations delivering sport must be rigorously and routinely monitored to ensure the protection of all members, including assessment of hiring processes and regular checks of coaching requirements and coach registrations at every level.

The 100%

A symbiotic relationship exists between the 99% and the 1% - recovering and rebuilding a robust sport system must capture the whole 100% of Canadians who revel in the joys of sport. The system needs to be healthy for all Canadians, whereby every person has unimpeded access to sport and where every person, at every level of sport, has their human rights met without barriers.

To move toward this possible future, participants identified the following actions to be imperative:

- Enhanced reporting of government mandates and auditing of the financing of sport to identify waste in spending, specifically on the operational costs of multi-sport agencies like the COC and OTP.
- Hiring at every level requires robust vetting and removal of conflicts of interest.
- Undertake a broad-based consultation of every demographic at every level of sport who is, or could be, participating in sport to understand what Canadians want and need sport to be.
- Investigation to clarify the absence of an organisation that is genuinely responsible for the development of sport in Canada, and subsequently establish an agency that can effectively oversee, operate, and develop sport and can adequately deliver on a revised Canadian Sport Policy.
- Increase funding into the grassroots to establish and improve safety, access, and equity for all sports, regardless of a sport's national or global success. Funding the

grassroots cannot take money away from excellence funding (money that supports athletes) but rather, after understanding the waste of operational costs in the system, altering the operational budget to service the grassroots.

In focusing on the funding and servicing of the 99%, not only does the selection pool for the 1% grow but so too does the financial health of the NSOs – potentially allowing NSOs to create a more stable business model that is less reliant on government funding. In doing so, not only could the 99% continue to be better serviced but the 1% – the elite athletes performing a job for Canada – could have access to a greater financial pool that could ensure the human rights they have long been denied are met (e.g. collective bargaining and the right to organise).

“Government funding is the drug” – and it exists to satisfy the global model. It is necessary that the CEOs of Canadian National Sporting Organizations can run their sport without the influence of the Olympic rings dictating their every move so that both the 1% and the 99% can be adequately served.

Section 4

A National Inquiry

Following the complexities identified in sections 1 and 2, participants discussed the recent advocacy work from athletes, advocates, and scholars in pushing the Government to enact a national inquiry and why such a movement has been important.

What is a National Inquiry?

A national inquiry is a mechanism initiated pursuant to Part I of the Inquiries Act intended to address issues of national importance, restore public trust, and provide solutions to pressing and complex societal issues.

Features of an inquiry:

- Independence from government,
 - Limited ability for the government to interfere,
 - Non-partisan commissioner or judicial appointment,
- Ability to subpoena testimony, compel documents,
- In camera and public hearings,
- Flexible mandate and can be broadly scoped,
- Can work across jurisdictional lines.

It was highlighted that within the Inquiries Act, there are two types of inquiries that can be conducted. An Inquiry initiated under Part 1 provides the broadest scope and is best equipped to address issues of national importance, which require restoration of public trust. A Part 1 inquiry is initiated by Cabinet and is generally designed to explore broad societal problems. Examples include the Dubin Inquiry into doping in sport, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address the tragedy of residential schools, and the MacDonald Commission, which created our national Employment Insurance system.

However, a departmental inquiry can be initiated by any Minister under Part 2 of the Act. This type of inquiry is intended to investigate issues within their specific portfolio and is designed to address administrative and departmental matters. Participants of the think tank were concerned that, to satisfy the calls of advocates for an inquiry, the Minister of Sport may choose to initiate a Part 2 departmental inquiry, rather than support the call for a Part 1 inquiry through Cabinet. In our view, such an exercise would be futile and a gross failure, as a Part 2 inquiry would be limited in scope, lack the ability to compel documents or testimony

from actors falling outside the purview of Sport Canada and be unable to address the complex jurisdictional issues that require deep study to create meaningful reform.

foundation to ensuring a healthy population and a successful sporting culture in Canada, while at the same time setting an example for the rest of the world.

Why a National Inquiry?

As outlined in sections 1 and 2, the Canadian sport system is not established to execute the Canadian Sport Policy and is failing the masses while simultaneously eroding elite sport. It was determined that a national inquiry is necessary to understand what all Canadians need in terms of safety, health, and human rights. Additionally, to articulate what they want from sport and how it can best become a tool for wellness, community, and development instead of a propaganda tool for nationalist goals.

The current system has been discerned to be rife with undue influence, conflicts of interest, and safety, access, and equity issues. Additionally, taxpayer dollars are being squandered away to service those failures. It was noted that while an inquiry into the whole sport system might appear costly, the refusal to enact an inquiry will have a greater human cost and will see the continued waste of public money on a sport system that is currently not protecting its population.

“The system is sick and unhealthy – but so are the people in it.” There is an opportunity for leadership in Canada to remove the fear that an inquiry would lead to negative exposure and flip the script to utilise a national inquiry as the

Summary

The most crucial step toward this possible future is through a national inquiry wherein human rights can be recentred into Canadian sport. There is a need to engage in a broader consultation with sport participants from all levels, ages, and backgrounds to ensure the dissection and reconstruction of the system aligns with the needs of all sporting Canadians. By doing so, Canada has the opportunity to create a model that can change the global sports framework.

While some members of the Government of Canada and leaders of the sport community

may question the motive of this think tank and its report, it was evident from all those who participated that there were no hidden agendas nor ill will. The goal of all those who contributed to this report is for Canada to reflect on how the sport system is serving the Canadian population to ensure that Canadian sport becomes safe, accessible, and equitable for all participants at every level and within every community.

